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NOTES ON THE HORTICULTURAL HISTORY OF CALIFORNIA IRISES

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With the sudden increase in interest in the growing of California irises² by gardeners it seems desirable to bring together at this time the information available concerning the early horticultural history of the group. For many of the species little or no information is to be found. In some instances the record of when a species was first grown is to be found in personal communications between growers, while in other cases the earliest information about a plant is to be found in old catalogues. It is hoped that readers will contribute information concerning the group so that it may be included when the California irises are treated in their entirety at a later date.

Students of the genus disagree as to the number of species of *Iris* as well as to the names which should be applied to them. Foster is the latest investigator to study and publish on American irises and the names applied here, as well as the species concept, are those used by him in his paper 'A Cyto-Taxonomic Survey of the North American Species of *Iris* (Contr. Gray Herb. No. CXIX, 1937).

As with many of the native plants of California, the California irises were first brought to the attention of gardeners by the English who grew a number of them in their gardens during the first half of the 19th Century. So far as is known, the first California iris to be grown was *Iris tenax*, a variably colored species common in the fields and open woods of Washington and Oregon. This iris was first collected by David Douglas in 1825 at several places in what is now Oregon and was first grown in England from seed collected by him. It was first figured in 1829 in Edward's Botanical Register. The specific name refers to the tough, fibrous leaves which, according to Douglas, were used by certain Indian tribes to make cord for snaring animals and for making fishing nets. John Lindley, in writing about this iris for the Botanical Register, suggested that it might be grown in wasteland in England for hemp. This species is apparently the only West Coast iris which Douglas introduced into horticulture.

Nothing is known about the garden history of *Iris tenax* var. *australis*, a lavender to purple-flowered form commonly found in the San Bernardino Mountains and occasionally seen in the San Gabriel and San Jacinto Mountains of Southern California where it grows under pines at altitudes of 4000-7500 feet. It was first grown at the Rancho Santa Ana Botanic Garden in 1937. Another variety of this species is *Iris tenax* var. *Gormanii* which has pearly white to cream or butter-yellow flowers. This variety was mentioned in a note in the Gardener's Chronicle for August 2, 1932 where it was reported that

¹ Rancho Santa Ana Botanic Garden.

² 'California irises' is here used to include all species belonging to the subsection 'Californicae' of the genus *Iris* and is not taken to mean species limited to the geographical boundaries of the state.

plants from an Oregon garden obtained the year previously had bloomed that year. The variety *Gormanii* is found native in a small area in northern Oregon.

The next California iris to be mentioned in horticultural literature appears to be the familiar *Iris Douglasiana*, which is commonly found along the coast from Monterey County (one locality has been reported in San Luis Obispo Co.) north to southern Oregon. This species was first collected by Menzies in 1792 at Port Trinidad but was not introduced into horticulture until 1873 when it was grown by the English nursery firm of James Veitch and Sons. Where the seed was obtained is not known. It is known that Wm. Lobb collected in



Plate XXV—*Iris Hartwegii*, photographed by C. B. Wolf at Pinegrove, Amador Co., May, 1933.

California for the Veitch firm between the years 1849 and 1857 and had then remained in California until his death in 1863. The species is not mentioned in 'Hortus Veitchii' which lists many of the plants introduced by that firm. It was first illustrated in 1874 in Curtis's Botanical Magazine and it is interesting to note that the first known illustration of the species shows three flowers which illustrate the range of colors that are to be found in the species. A number of varieties of this iris have been described. Probably the best known one is called *Iris Douglasiana* var. *bracteata* in Foster's paper but it is probably better known to gardeners as *Iris Watsoniana*. It differs from *Douglasiana* mainly in having paler green leaves and smaller, usually deep purple flowers. *Iris Douglasiana* var. *altissima* was described from plants collected near Half Moon Bay south of San Francisco about 1913. It was grown in cultivation for a number of years, but it is believed that no living plants of this variety are known at the present time. Other varieties are *Iris Doug-*

lasiana var. *oregonensis*, from the coast of southern Oregon, and *Iris Douglasiana* forma *alpha*, a pale-colored form described by Dykes in 1914.

The Sierra Iris, *Iris Hartwegii*, was first described from plants collected by Theodor Hartweg in 1848. When it was first brought into cultivation is not known. It is not listed among the plants introduced into horticulture by Hartweg. There is, however, a note in the Journal of the Royal Horticultural Society on its hardiness on the Isle of Wight for the winter of 1879-1880, so it must have been known to gardeners at that time. It was first figured in Dyke's 'The Genus Iris' in 1913 and he says that it "is not common in cultivation in this country (England) . . . and at best is a weak-growing and rather insignificant species." *Iris Hartwegii* is found in the Sierras in dry, open forests, at altitudes of 2500-6000 feet, from Plumas Co. south to Kern Co.

The Ground Iris, *Iris macrosiphon*, is a complex of variable forms which are not well understood and Foster treats such names as *Iris amabilis* and *Iris californica* under *macrosiphon* saying that "specific segregates will undoubtedly be separated after study of living plants." Little is known about its horticultural history. Purdy offered seed of the 'Ukiah Form' of *macrosiphon* as early as 1889. In 1912, Dykes recommended it for English rock gardens and a year later wrote that it was a very rare plant in England.

The yellow-flowered *Iris bracteata*, native to the southern part of Oregon, was first described in 1884. The date of its introduction into horticulture is not known. O. Stapf wrote in Curtis's Botanical Magazine in 1915 that it "has been in cultivation in the Iris Collection at Kew for a considerable number of years." In 1932 a note appeared in the Gardener's Chronicle saying that it had been introduced from its native Oregon about half a century ago. It would, therefore, appear that this species has been in cultivation since shortly after it was first described. It is a large and handsome species and according to Foster is less variable than other members of the subsection. It was first illustrated in Garden and Forest in 1888.

Iris Purdyi, native to the Redwood areas of Mendocino and Humboldt counties was first described by Alice Eastwood of the California Academy of Sciences. This distinctive iris is usually yellow-flowered although light lavender forms may be found. It was probably first grown in England by Dykes from plants sent to him by Purdy. In 1913 he reports that it is rare in cultivation in England because of the difficulty in moving it.

Iris Munzii was described as a species by Foster in 1938 although specimens of it had been collected as early as 1898. It is related to *Iris Hartwegii* and *Iris tenax* but in size, leaves, and shape of the floral parts it is quite different from its relatives. The flower color is a pale bluish lavender to purple. It is known from only a few localities along the foothills of the Sierras in Tulare Co. So far as is known this species was not in cultivation until 1935 when it was grown at the Rancho Santa Ana Botanic Garden. It is believed that this species will become popular with gardeners as it is better known.

The pale yellow to white-flowered *Iris chrysophylla* is found in southwest to central Oregon and was first described by Howell in 1902. Little is known about its horticultural history except that Dykes reported it blooming in England in 1910.

Certainly no native West Coast iris has ever enjoyed the popularity which the little yellow-flowered *Iris innominata* from southwestern Oregon now has. This is interesting because it is one of the latest of the species belonging to this group of iris to be discovered by gardeners. It was first brought into cultivation by Mrs. John R. Leach of Portland who collected it in Curry Co., Oregon, in 1928. It was first shown by her at the Laurelhurst Flower Show in Portland in 1932. The following year it was introduced into England and since that time its rise to popularity has been meteoric. A note in the October issue of the Journal of the California Horticultural Society reported *Iris innominata* as one of the three most often discussed plants at the California Horticultural Society meetings during the years 1938-1949. While its characteristic flower color is yellow, it varies considerably and today, through selection and hybridization, a wide range of colors exists including a reported red and yellow bicolor. One of the most enthusiastic growers is Dr. Matthew C. Riddle, of Portland, and the reader is referred to his excellent paper (Jour. Cal. Hort. Soc. IX:13-18, 1948) for a complete discussion of this species.

Iris Thompsonii was described by Foster in 1936. This little-known iris is found in only a few localities in northern California and southwestern Oregon and is in many ways similar to *Iris innominata*. When this species was first grown is not known. It was offered by one grower at least as early as 1938.

Nothing is known about the horticultural history of *Iris tenuissima*, *Iris tenuissima* var. *purdyiformis*, *Iris tenuis*, or *Iris Fernaldii*. *Iris pinetorum*, a little-known species from Plumas Co., California, was first grown at the Rancho Santa Ana Botanic Garden in 1948.